

## If the Trees were Yellow by LucyBrown45

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Alternate Universe - Gender Changes, F/F, Fem!Hargrove, Female Billy Hargrove, Female Steve Harrington, Genderswap, Kisses, Masturbation, domestic abuse

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-04-29

**Updated:** 2018-04-29

**Packaged:** 2022-04-22 04:42:50

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 12,006

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

Billy just wants to go back to California. If she can't do that, she just wants to play basketball. Stevie just wants to take a nap. It's hard work being a teenage girl.

## **If the Trees were Yellow**

“Billy. Billy, if you don’t open this door by the time I count to three.”

Neil doesn’t have to finish the sentence. Billy knows. Jesus Christ. Knows what’ll happen if she doesn’t go out there and face him. She leans her hands heavily into the edges of the basin, the pale yellow porcelain cool under her hands. Up close to the medicine cabinet mirror she looks into her own blue eyes. Troublemakers.

“That’s one, Billy.”

There’s sleepdust tracked in the corners. She didn’t wash her face properly this morning before layering up mascara. There wasn’t time. But she wouldn’t be caught dead applying make-up in the school bathroom. She bites her lip, tasting murky tears she didn’t notice, not even staring at her own reflection.

“Two. Billy.”

She sighs and hangs her head. Hunches her shoulders before pushing away from the sink, dragging fingertips. Holds her breath. She throws the door open so hard, the handle slams into the wall. She spreads her arms, palms facing up. “What? What can I do for you, dad?” Her mouth cracked open, scissorsmile. Voice too loud to be anything but a pretence at politeness. Bitter. So fucking angry.

Neil surges her, takes her neck between his hands, his thumbs press into her cheekbones. He forces her to her knees on the cold bathroom floor. He yanks her head back by her hair, blonde curls pulled taut. He uses his fist to smack her across the face in the pause between letting go and her trying to get her bearings set right. She feels her jaw shift, her body following and spits blood, hands just catching her from sprawling out.

Her vision swims trying to focus on the lines of grout in the floor. She’ll look up in a minute. Just gotta make sure the tiles are straight. She’ll look up and wait for him to make the next move. She’s done for the night. He can have this one. He beats her to it. “There are dishes waiting for you.”

She hears him walk away. She coughs. Gulps down a hollow rasp of air. Right, dishes. She nods to herself. Wash the dishes, Billy. She shifts, sitting back on her heels. She tips her chin up, breathing heavily through her mouth. Tastes the iron murk of residue blood as she runs her tongue over her teeth. The dishes. He could have just asked.

Billy grips the side of the bathtub to drag herself to her feet. She rolls up onto the balls of her bare feet trying to find grounding. She closes her eyes. Breathes through her nose. Her lashes sticking wetly as she opens them on the exhale. Wipes at her face with the back of her hand. She tucks her hair behind ears and calmly walks towards the kitchen. Teeth grit.

Susan and Maxine are curled up on the couch watching *Hardcastle & McCormick*. She eyes the little wooden bowl on the telephone table. Empty. Her dad's fucked off for the night. Got his kicks and gone to get wasted with his buddies. Susan calls out airily to her, "Thank you, Billy." Attention not leaving the TV for a second.

Neil's a fucking weirdo and he'll check up on this exchange. Check that it happened. So Billy says, "You're welcome, Susan." She keeps her eyes on Max. Because Max is staring at her, forehead wrinkled over grey eyes. Billy fights the urge to laugh and gingerly steps away.

In addition to not being able to cook, Susan works long hours at a Motel. She goes out dressed in little kitten heels and a smart blazer. She's meant to work the reception, but she always looks so wrecked that Billy highly suspects she's at least sometimes has to join ranks with the maids. She should get her fucking nose outta the air.

Susan brought back burgers for dinner, laid out crockery and cutlery anyway to pretend like she'd put in some effort. A neat stack of four spotless plates and untouched knives and forks look up at Billy from under the dripping facet. She runs the water too hot and the skin all up her arms goes blotchy. As she finishes towelling and tidying away, she wipes her sore hands on the back of her jeans and pats her pockets. Keys. Smokes.

Dad doesn't normally want a second round when he comes back, but if he's drinking. Billy can never predict it. She makes a dash for it.

She doesn't bother pausing to hear if Susan has anything to add, just grabs her boots from the rack in the hall and treads barefoot over damp leaves to her car.

She slings them on the passenger seat, revs the *Camaro's* engine and speeds out, the rubber of the peddles rough on her soles, reminding her how stupid this all is. She beats the heel of her hand on the steering wheel, the ache radiating up her wrist. She smacks at the tape deck and screams with *Wendy O. Fuck*.

She's driving way too fast. She doesn't even know where she's going. She stretches her back straight and peers out at the long, dark road before her. There are no streetlights in the backwoods of Hawkins. Trees shadowblur in her peripheral. She could just close her eyes. Just close 'em. Let Jesus take the wheel. She tugs at the *Mother Mary* 'round her neck. A beam of bright headlight makes her squint and she lifts her foot off the accelerator.

Smoothly, she rolls her window down, lights a cigarette acts as though she'd been driving reasonable all this time. Keeps facing forward as the other car goes past. She sucks at the filter. There's sweat dampening her white t-shirt at her underarms and down her spine. She feels hot, but the fall nightair makes her skin gooseprickle.

She turns the corner, pulls into the parking lot of the stripmall. She parks obnoxiously over two free spaces. She sighs and glares at the neon sign of the liquor store. She can see the dick from two nights ago who cut up her fake ID, fucking about behind the counter. She could go in there and get payback. Grab him by the shirt collar and slam his head into the cash register. He's lucky she doesn't want to get into it anymore tonight. Little shit.

Billy pushes the car door open and swings her legs out. Her feet land heavily on the asphalt. The realisation that she is going to have to get up makes her feel leadheavy. Hurricane battered. She leans her forearms on her knees. Breathes one Mississippi. Two.

She stands, reaches her arms over her head and stretches out her aching ribs. It doesn't feel good. She puts her hands on her hips and looks down at her boots. She doesn't give a fuck. Billy slams the door and stalks towards the *7-Eleven*, feet cold.

She gets the biggest *Slurpee*. Bright fucking blue. She watches the girl fill the cup. Watches as she cracks her neck, her red hair splaying across the back of her uniform tabard. The girl puts it down on the counter without raising her eyes. When she does, Billy knows she's caught sight of her bare feet. She runs her tongue across her bottom lip and tips into the girl's space.

The girl drums her fingers. Nails clicking. "You wan' a Super Star Sports Coin?"

Billy snorts loudly through her nose. "No." She does not want any more of those fucking ugly chips sitting on her dashboard. Fucking lame. The girl frowns. She looks sleepy. Billy ducks her head and takes a long sip through the straw. Eyes on the girl's. They're green. Her brain feels instantly tv-static from the ice. She grins. Knows she's dripping blue raspberry down her chin, gums bruise coloured.

An obnoxious wolfwhistle slices through the fluorescent quiet of the store. Billy turns, twisting casually from leaning with her hip to her elbows. A dumb jock in a varsity jacket is leering at her. He looks twelve. Freckles all over his face. Hair spiked from too much gel.

"Is that for me?" She raises an eyebrow at him.

He doesn't get it. He sidles up to her. "Maybe."

She wipes at her mouth and twosteps, levelling her stance. She's taller than him. He puts a *Snickers* and a pack of *Red Vines* down. He drags his gaze over her collarbones. Lower. The store-girl coughs and he rummages through his pockets for coins without looking away. Billy lets him. She grips her *Slurpee*. "This too."

He blinks at that. Looks her in the face. His mouth crinkles in displeasure. "Sure." He points at her feet. "You've got no shoes on."

She crosses her ankles. "Mhmm." Sips at her drink.

He takes a step back from her. His little brain is ticking over. His eyes scattering over her dirty t-shirt, mussed hair, smudged mascara. "You new in town?"

Billy hacks a laugh out around a melting mouthful. Shakes her head.

What a douche. He tilts his head. Stutters on. "Naw. No. It's just. Carol and Stevie know everybody." He scuffs a pristine sneaker against the floor.

"Who the fuck are Carol and Stevie?"

A man with a sixpack of *Bud* under his arm approaches and hovers near them, clearly wanting to reach the checkout. The storegirl sighs and taps Billy on the shoulder. Billy turns her head quickly and kisses her on the cheek before running for the door, grabbing her *Slurpee* and the boy by the wrist as she goes.

As they get put into the parking lot, she jabs her elbow into the boy's side. She walks backwards watching his startled face. "So. C'mon man. I'm starting at the shitty high school tomorrow. Who died and left Carol and Stevie in charge?"

He rubs at his ribs, still recovering. "Yeah? You a senior?" He puts his candy bar into his pocket and comes to a stop near a beige *Ford* and Billy sits up on the hood. Somewhere behind her, a leering shout goes out and is smothered with choking giggles. She looks over her shoulder. A group of boys wearing the same jacket as Tommy are pushing at each other.

She looks at her knees and taps the car under her. She shrugs. "I guess."

"I'm Tommy."

She wrinkles her nose at him. "Right. Whatever, Tommy."

Tommy opens the pack of liquorice and gaping-mouth chewing, "You gonna tell me your name?"

"No. You gonna tell me if I have to beat on Carol and Stevie on my first day?"

He bends at the waist, expelling a rush of air through his cheeks. "Wha'? Beat on? No. Don't do that. What kinda girl are you?"

She raises a thick eyebrow and slurps at her drink.

He points his ragged *Red Vine* at her. "Seriously. Where you from?"

"California."

Tommy offers her the pack. She takes one and sticks it in her cup and sips melted blue through it. She can feel a migraine brewing. Too much sugar.

"Huh. What you doing here then?"

"The fuck do I know?"

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Nancy has real fucking good reputation. And to be frank, Stevie isn't sure how she manages it. She's had Nancy scream at her. That was fun. Nancy's literally nearly shot her. So. That's cool. She's smart and skinny and like. Strong-willed. Stevie's not jealous. It's just she knows that Nancy can be kinda mean sometimes and too fucking honest. Like now. Judging Stevie's college essay.

She's not awake enough for this shit. She has to get up an extra fifteen minutes early to pick Nancy up and drive them to school in-line with Nancy's strict schedule. Which includes a homework recap before they head on in.

"It's good." Nancy's got a pencil hovering over Stevie's dog-eared pages.

Stevie's not sure she fully trusts Nancy's judgement any more. Jonathan's nice. Kinda. He's more weird than anything. When Stevie looks at him, all she can think about is him lurking in the woods by her house. Taking those pervy photos. She doesn't know how Nancy can grieve Barb and be dating the guy that ruined their last sleepover together. She gets that it might be a comfort thing. But, still.

"No, it's not. I'm not good at this stuff, Nance."

"C'mon. I can help. Can I mark on it?"

Stevie shrugs. "Sure."

“So here.” Nancy circles a whole paragraph. “You talk about Billie Jean King. But then, you start describing *Sixteen Candles*.” She looks at Stevie, her head to one side. “I just don’t see how they’re linked.”

Stevie snatches the paper from her hand. “Look, forget it.” Stevie knows Nancy thinks she’s dumb. “I’m not going to college anyway.”

“You have to go to college, Stevie.”

Stevie sticks her bottom lip out and huffs a breath, rustling her bangs upwards. “I’m just gonna work for my dad.” She twists her hands in her lap. “Betty will teach me the phones. I’ll buy us both bottles of *Charlie*. It’ll be great.”

Nancy frowns and looks like she’s about to say something, but the arrogant roar of a car hurtling into the school parking lot distracts her. She’s born and bred in Hawkins, knows every car and their owners. At the sight of the unfamiliar petrol blue *Camaro*, she gets out the passenger side of Stevie’s *Bimmer* and rests her elbows on the door to watch.

Stevie groans. Nancy’s a nightmare when she gets a bee in her bonnet about something. College applications or whatever this new headache is. She folds her elbows on the roof and watches as a small, fierce red-headed kid slams out of the *Camaro*, sticks her middle finger in the air and cracks a skateboard down to speed in the direction of the middle school.

After a beat. The driver side door swings open and a girl steps out. She looks like a boy in light *Levi’s* and biker boots. She’s got the most ridiculous blonde curls Stevie has ever seen. She turns as she closes the door, tugs on her waistband as she surveys the scenery. Her gaze lands on Stevie, catches her staring. Winks and grins as she strides away.

Nancy looks over her shoulder at Stevie, mouth pursed in an angry-looking kissy face. Stevie can feel she’s gone all blushy and she’s not sure why.

Being new fucking sucks. Billy has to spend first period with the guidance counsellor, who is concerned that she has yet to apply to any colleges. She warns Billy about making the right impression, her eyes peering through cat-eye spectacles at the *Marlboros* in the top pocket of Billy's denim jacket. A mint green sweater is draped over her shoulders and Billy wants to twist it around her throat.

After sitting through an excruciatingly slow math class, two redheads zero in on Billy as she's shoving her new textbooks into her locker. What is it with fucking gingers. She pauses what she's doing, smiles slowly at them. Points at the one on the left. "Carol." Carol's lips twitch. Billy points to the other one. "Stevie."

The girl's eager grin falls. "What? No. I'm Vicki." She runs her fingers through her hair. "We don't really talk to Stevie anymore."

Carol jostles her books against Vicki's and widens her eyes. "Anyway." She thrusts a fluro-flyer out to Billy. "Tina is having a Halloween party tomorrow." She shrugs her shoulders. "You should come."

Billy wants to say, the fuck I should. But she doesn't. She takes the invite. "Sure."

Vicki says, "After school, we're going to the mall to--"

Carol steps on her foot and artfully turns towards to walk away. Eyes knowingly and carefully widened, just a touch. "Bye, Billy."

Billy babywaves at their retreating backs, four fingers clapping slowly into her palm. "Bye bitches," she says under her breath.

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Billy doesn't have any friends. It's not a thing. It doesn't keep her up at night. Friends are hard work. They always want to know stuff. And want her to join in with stuff. What's your favourite colour? Do you watch *Square Pegs*? Where's your mom?

She's tapping her pencil against her book, in last lesson of the day. Timebomb ticking for all eternity. The teacher wanted them to read a chapter of the biology workbook, but that was twenty minutes ago

and Billy finished in twelve. The girl in front of her twists around, thick braids swinging. Billy flashes her teeth, thinking this might be an argument, but the girl whispers, "I'm Ruth. You done?"

Billy keeps her teeth out just in case, but narrows her eyes. "Yeah."

Ruth turns back in her seat to face the front and sticks her hand in the air like some teacher's pet. "Mr Peterson. Sir. Billy and me are finished and she's new. Can I show her the lab?"

Mr Peterson sighs wearily, before making a shooing motion with his hands. Billy has never blindly followed anyone, but for whatever reason, in this new shit town, she follows Ruth.

They don't say anything as they speed out the school doors and over to Billy's car. Ruth tugs at the door handle like she expected Billy to have already unlocked it. She grins at Billy and bounces on the balls of her feet. "Well?"

Billy raises an eyebrow. "Aren't you meant to be showing me the lab?"

Ruth bites her lip. "I'll show you tomorrow, if you're that keen." She lets go of the door. "It's nothing special though. They just spent some money on new Bunsen burners and recruited some kids to be science techs."

"Are you a science tech?"

Ruth puts her hands on her hips. "So what if I was?"

Billy puts her hands up, palms facing Ruth and lowers her head. "Jesus." She turns and leans against the car, crosses her arms.

Ruth comes to lean next to her. "You gotta find something to do here, or you'll go outta your mind with boredom."

Billy hums. Sniffs. "I can't take you anywhere. I have to wait for my step-sister."

"Okay." Ruth touches her elbow. "I'll show you the lab though, tomorrow?"

Christ. Her face is so fucking earnest. "That'd be swell."

She's not good at faking it, but Ruth doesn't seem to notice or care. She squeezes Billy's arm before bounding away, purple *Jansport* bumping on her back.

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"You just have to complete the square, Stevie. We've been doing it all week."

Stevie's getting real tired of Nancy rubbing it in. She was there okay, she sat through boring Miss Crossley's algebra class. And. For fuck's sake, she went to the special study session afterschool. She skipped basketball for that shit. She still doesn't get it. Nancy gawking at her isn't going to help.

"Can you just. Can you do this one for me?"

Nancy titters lightly through her nose. Gathers her pencils together. "Stevie." Her voice is soft, but a warning on the second syllable linger. Stevie shouldn't ask stuff like that.

So Stevie does what she does best. "Look. You wanna go see Jonathan, right? Help me out with this."

Nancy carefully looks at Stevie's math book. She's relying on Stevie for a ride. Stevie's eyes are so dark and her eyebrows are tilting all pleadingly. Stevie does know it, she just won't try.

"Barb woulda helped me."

Nancy grinds her teeth together at that. She snaps the hair-elastic around Stevie's wrist. "Don't say that."

Stevie rubs her red wrist. "S true."

Nancy's squints down at her nails. Picks at the edge of her thumb cuticle. Barb would have helped. Barb would make a joke about Stevie needing to be led by a carrot. She'd dig through her bag and find a pack of *Nillas* or a *Mallomar*. Stevie loves *Mallomars*. Nancy thinks about how Barb and Stevie only knew each other because of

her. She was never really sure if they liked each other.

“You don’t miss her.”

“You’re sucking Jonathan’s dick.” Stevie might have said the last bit too loud. She can feel eyes around the library blink out at her, like scattered nightjars.

Nancy begins to hustle her bag together. Stevie whispers, “Nance. I’m sorry.” She puts her hands over Nancy’s. “C’mon. I didn’t mean it like that.”

Nancy stops what she’s doing and sighs. Lets Stevie link their fingers. Her mouth twitches, tight lipped. Waits for Stevie to continue. “It’s just.” Stevie squeezes their hands. “He creeps me-“ Nancy moves to pull away, clicking her tongue loudly. Stevie doesn’t let go. “Okay. Okay. C’mon. We’ve got Tina’s party tonight.” She swings their arms side to side. “We’ll wear our dumb costumes and dance and just be normal. Normal teenagers having a good time.” She bites her lip.

Nancy looks at her from under her eyelashes. Stubborn, but malleable. She nods and quickly wraps Stevie in a tight hug.

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Billy’s on her third cigarette when Max finally decides to grace her with her presence. “You’re late again.” Max doesn’t say anything, just walks past Billy and stands in front of the passenger side. They lock eyes over the roof of the *Camaro*. Billy opens the car and they both get in. She turns the engine on. “You’re skating if you’re late again.”

She grips the steering wheel tight as she pulls out the parking lot. She thinks about how Max was late yesterday. How if she wasn’t fucking responsible for her, she could have taken Ruth wherever they were gonna go. Now she’s fucked whatever that might have been over. She told Ruth to go fuck herself when she had tried to show her the lab this morning. It wasn’t worth the hassle. It was already too embarrassing having to tell Ruth no in the first place. She didn’t need some nerdy bitch clingy on her jacket.

“Where were you?”

"I just-" She takes a quick look at Billy. Billy always knows when she's lying. It's like a superpower or something. "I was talking to some kids from my class."

Billy tilts her head. "Huh." She presses down on the accelerator. "Oh yeah? Settling in are you?"

Max catches the sneer in her voice. She shakes her head. "No-"

"Don't lie, Max." She turns her head to glare at the little bitch. "We're stuck in this fucking town and if I hate it, you're gonna hate it too." She turns the volume up on *Black Daze*. "We're stuck here and you know whose fault it is."

Before she even realises what she's doing, Max murmurs, "Yours."

Billy snaps at that. "Huh? What was that?"

"Nothing."

"Say it Max." She drives faster. "Tell me what you said." She lets her body go loose, rocking back in her seat, letting the car's speed get away from her. Her head lolling, watching Max through hooded eyes. If they crash, she won't have to put up with this shit any more. Being the fall guy. Who the fuck does Max think she is. Trying to blame her. Her. Like she did anything wrong. She did everything to try and keep them in California. Little bitch seems to have forgotten that.

"Say it," Screaming. She's going to lose her mind. She can't hear herself, she can't think over her own fucking screeching brain voice. You piece of shit. You whore. You dumbass nobody. It's your fault, Billy. It's your fucking fault, Billy. You did this.

Max swallows, turns her head away from Billy. Out in the road in front are the boys. They might be her friends. She's not sure yet. She raises her hand slightly towards Billy's, even though she knows she'll catch shit for that later. Billy doesn't like to be touched. "Billy, slow down."

"Slow down?" Billy catches sight of four dorks in *Ghostbusters* costumes cycling up ahead. "Slow down?" She arches her hand over the steering wheel. "These your pals? Your new fucking friends?"

“No, Billy. I don’t care.” She leans back in her seat, folds her arms, tries to pretend. “You’re going to kill them.”

Billy tips her head and whoops loudly. She holds onto the steering wheel with both hands and goes as fast as she dares. As she draws close to the kids she veers into the next lane, closely skirting them. They barrel like fluttering chickens onto the grassy bank, bikes and all.

Max turns in her seat. Hair flying. Heart horormovie-beating. They’re okay. She realises she’s been holding her breath and lets go. One deep breath. Two.

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Billy’s fucking starving. She’s knifing grape jelly over four slices of *Wonderbread* and smearing *Skippy* over that in a mess. She can feel Max glaring at the back of her head. Her frosty little eyes fingerpicking her frayed nerves. If Max had just been on time, she wouldn’t have got wound up like that. She smacks the bread together. Savage. Gets them each a plate.

Max’s mouth twists in disgust as Billy manhandles half the sandwich into her mouth. Billy looks pointedly at her and so she reaches for her own. She’s not that hungry. She could wait until dinner. But it’s a thing with Billy. Everything is a thing with Billy. But eating an afterschool snack is one of the things that’ll send her off the handles if Max refuses.

Sometimes she’ll toss an apple at Max, but she’ll still make them both sit at the table and drink cold glasses of milk with it. It’s orange juice today. Billy sloppily filling plastic beakers. She’s bouncing her knees up and down like she’s looking to run. She’s a fuckin’ psycho. Max picks at her crust.

“C’m on. I’ll eat it if you don’t.” Billy swallows her second and last mouthful. Throat gulping loudly. Wiping crumbs from her lips with both hands.

Max’s peers at her through lowered eyes. This is a trick. Billy pushes her chair back and puts her palms on her knees, going still. She looks

around the room as though expecting something to happen before staring at Max, waiting for her to eat.

“You can go, y’know?”

Billy shakes her head at the ground before looking back at Max, tongue bitten at the corner of her mouth. “Y’d like that.”

Max has got no idea what that means. She eats her sandwich.

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Billy is not wearing a costume. She’s never worn a fucking Halloween costume. She’d never got to go trick or treating so fuck that and fuck Max the little brat. Susan taking photos of her with her pathetic little pumpkin bucket. Like Susan is going treasure this lame-ass memory. She’s about to work a twelve hour shift, she won’t even remember to get the film developed.

Not like Billy has a choice. She couldn’t exactly buy anything and she doesn’t really own many clothes. She tucks a black tank top into her jeans and readjusts her bulky silver belt buckle. She rolls up the cuffs of her denims and pulls on a pair of black *Keds*. Christ. She had to sneak around Max to borrow Susan’s *Remington* to shave her ankles for this shit. She’s trying. She doesn’t. Like. Care, but she’s trying.

The party fucking sucks. Billy knew it would. It’s fucking cold in Hawkins, so she’s had to drink more to stay warm and so she’s wasted. Not buzzed like earlier when she’d managed to goad some ditz in a slutty *Madonna* costume into throwing her drink over her, which Billy rightfully retaliated with a swift slap to the face and an elbow to her throat. Just to make certain.

She’s hammered. Bored. The music is shit. Across the living room, two brunettes in dance leotards and leggings are looking vibe-killing serious. Too big sweaters covering everything important. Billy figures, the twig looking priss is definitely Nancy Wheeler. She’s hissing determinedly or maybe just tipsily into the ear of Miss Stevie. Billy grins. Stephanie Harrington. What a fucking babe.

She looks uncomfortable in her stupid *Flashdance* costume. Billy’s

been planning to join the basketball team and had heard she had to get the go ahead from Captain Stevie. Stevie whose name she'd heard a million fucking times over the last few days, but hadn't actually caught sight of. Stevie who apparently now comes complete with greenbean sidedish, Nancy.

Billy can tell from Stevie's exposed shoulders and calves that she's fit from playing. Billy knows what it's like to stand next to girls like Nancy. It's a fucking cuntache. Billy can feel Stevie's awkward shuffling in her own bones. Trying to deflect the fact that she'd look much better in a tee and shorts by leaning against the wall, curling her fingers in her hair. Trying not to look like a slut 'cause everyone knows she's the single friend. Billy's heard some shit about some dweeb Nancy is banging.

Billy decides to help Stevie out. She lumbers across the room, pushing some kid into the couch. "Harrington." She pulls Stevie's side ponytail, her clumsy hands stroking the back of her head.

Stevie doesn't say anything, but stares at her. Eyes darting to her mouth and back up. Well. Billy's game if she is. Jesus. Fucking Hawkins. Nancy huffs loudly and walks away. Billy leans into wall next to Stevie, arms brushing. Touches her fingertips, ever so soft to Stevie's hip. Voice low, close to Stevie's neck, just behind her ear. "You wanna have some fun?"

Stevie pushes her away, but keeps her hand on Billy's shoulder. She's slightly taller than Billy and tilts her head down to look into Billy glazed eyes. "I. Don't know who. You are." Her incredulous glare splits Billy out into giggles. She rocks back on her heels, dragging Stevie closer. She's too drunk for this. Fuck. Stevie pushes her again and walks away.

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"Get. Up." Neil is looming over her bed. Billy's head is pounding. She's naked under her sheets. Jesus. Get the fuck away from me. "Max is going to be late."

"Okay." She rubs her eyes. Her throat is sore. "Okay."

She feels fucking rough. Like barnfloor, prisonpissshole, gutter rough. She falls asleep in first period Spanish, but Mrs Warren is like. A hundred and four years old and has never even been to *Tijuana*. So when Billy smiles sweetly, *lo siento mucho* because she's a fucking Grade A student, the bitch tells Billy to pick her pen up, but doesn't send her to the school office. So. That's fine.

She'd swiped an orange off some kid's tray at lunch and managed to get the hall-monitor manning the milk-fridge to give her a free carton. She's feeling eight times better by the end of the day, in time for the good stuff. Billy walks past Stevie on her way to the locker-room. She winks at her. 'Cause she fucking can. Stevie blushes. 'Cause she's fucking dumb.

Billy spent study hall half listening to Ruth and some twat in a cheerleader uniform bitching about Stevie. Proper undignified. Not fucking classy. Whatever. Not like she thought Ruth could be cool or anything. Billy doesn't know anything about this Stevie kid, other than she's easy on the fucking eyes, but girls shouldn't snaketongue like that. If Billy's got a fucking problem, she hunts them down and makes sure that they won't be a problem again.

In gym, Coach Maddens takes one look at Billy and pushes her out front to be team leader. She's in her fucking throne-room. Smug as a cream-licking cat. She sticks her tongue out, bites it between her teeth staring straight at Harrington. She's wearing fucking Hawkins High dance shorts. Her long legs kinda shiny looking. Billy wants to sink her teeth into the meat just above Stevie's knee. Find out what moisturiser that is.

Those legs are obviously what got her to Captain, but she's kicking about kinda awkward and Billy knows they're actually fucking pointless. This is going to be a cakewalk. Billy picks a bunch of bitches who look like, if it came to it, they could at least scratch the eyes out of the bunch Harrington chooses.

She goes hard. Gets up close behind Harrington. Can feel the sweat on the back of Harrington's shirt on her chest. Her voice stutters from Stevie's fast jostling forearm pressed into her breastbone, "Hey sweetheart." It's deep enough, that she still catches Stevie's subconscious dipped eyelid.

Stevie misses her footing when she tries to skirt around Billy, but manages to stay up right. Billy's on her tail though. "Heard you used to pretty popular." Her palm grazes the inside of Stevie's thigh as she reaches for the ball. "Then everyone found what a dyke you are."

"Maybe you should just shut up-" Billy rams her elbow into Stevie's ribs and ploughs down the court with her prize. Stevie falls straight on her ass. She's not even wearing basketball sneakers. But stupid blue Nike's. Who's she trying to impress. Billy dunks the ball easily and grins at Stevie trying to recover, bent over, breathing heavily. She licks her bottom lip. She feels miles better.

The open gym door catches Billy's eye. Nancy Wheeler is stood there watching. Stevie follows her gaze and without Nancy even saying anything, she turns and follows outside. Billy nearly lunges for her. Nobody walks away from Billy like that. What she crawling to Nancy for. Fucking joke.

After, Billy finds Ruth leaning against her car. She still feels pent up. Irritated at Stevie's early departure. She didn't even finish the fucking game. She's Captain, she can't bail like that. What a mess. Billy can feel sweat pricking under her nape, even though she's still got her hair tied in a tangled bun. "Get in."

"What about your step-sister?"

"Fuck her." Billy slings her bag in the back of her car and barely waits for Ruth to close the door before driving away. Fast. Going faster despite the hesitant look on Ruth's face.

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Billy can't tell if Ruth is trying to be her friend or if she just wants to find shit out and spread it about her behind her back. It's a dangerous line to tread, especially with Billy. 'Cause she will find out and beat Ruth so hard even her own mother couldn't identify her corpse. In any case, when Ruth had challenged Billy's brush off with a pack of *Marlboro Reds*, Billy had spat on the floor at her feet, but accepted. Free smokes are free smokes.

Ruth is a bit fucking chatty for Billy's liking. She hums too. She

always fucking humming something. And she seems to think that 'cause Billy's from California, that she'll put Ruth's rap mixtapes on and dance with her or some shit. Billy shot that delusion down pretty quick. But in some pique of madness, she'd tried to make up for by giving Ruth a ride to school this morning. Max gawping at her from the backseat.

Whatever. It's fucking Friday. Varsity fucking basketball practice. Billy's amped for this. Surely, even Hawkins can't fuck up basketball. Maybe Stevie was just playing dead yesterday just for gym class. She's fucking Captain. Billy wants to see Miss Stevie's fire.

"Alright." Billy's lazily dribbles the ball down the court. "Alright, alright, alright." Her team's ahead by about a million points. This is not what she wanted and she's fucking mad about it. She's never been so fucking bored and it's like pins and needles in her fucking ears or something. Coach Maddens knows it. Lets Billy take centre-stage.

Stevie's tiptoe-teetering in front her. Not planting her feet. Fuck. It's like she's asking to get struck out. "Miss Stevie." Billy's circus-calls her name. "Miss Stevie, everyone."

"Jesus, do you ever shut up."

Billy sneers at Stevie's doggy-paddle. Her outstretched arms. The sweat dripping from the tips of her bangs. It's like she's never even fucking played. Billy rushes the line, gets Stevie in the diaphragm with her elbow and jumps. Swish swish.

She turns and lunges, her sneaker close to Stevie's ribs where she's sprawled out on the gym floor. She grabs Harrington's hand and pulls her half-way to being able to get up. She looks her dead in the eye. "Don't be a pussy. Stand the fuck still and draw a charge." She lets her go, hears the smack of her back as she steps over those fucking *Bambi* legs.

Stevie should count herself lucky that Billy didn't kill her. Stevie's no fun. No fun at all. What's the fucking point. Now that even the prettiest thing in Hawkins has ruined the only thing that might have saved it.

Billy has to count in her head as she gets changed so that she doesn't do something stupid like throw a fist into Stevie's stomach. She counts to ten a hundred and eighty times before banging down the corridor and towards the parking lot. She counts to a thousand a hundred and six times as she paces in front of her car, stomping her irritation into the asphalt.

Christ. She hates school. It's the biggest waste of fucking time. And the worst fucking part of it is waiting for Max. Every fucking day. She's here. She fucking leaves the building when the bell goes. What the fuck is Max doing that even on wheels. On a fucking skateboard. She's late to Billy's car. She should be here first.

There's a kid lurking behind Max. He's got his hands tucked under the straps of his backpack and is frowning like Max told him where to step off. "Who's that kid?"

"No-one."

Billy looks at her. Her eyes are all watery. She's slouched low in the seat. Billy fingers the keys, but doesn't turn them. "Then why are you so upset?" She lights a cigarette.

"I'm not." She sounds like she's going to cry. Billy wouldn't mind if she did. That might be fun. Or not fun. Distracting. Play for play. Billy's always fucking upset, so this makes a change. It wouldn't be too much. That's a sibling thing, right. Bonding maybe. She'd rib Max for the drive home and then buy her a pack of *Oreos* or something. She likes *Oreos*. Fuck knows why.

She hums around her cigarette. "Don't be a dumb bitch."

"I'm not." Max shouldn't repeat herself. Billy hates that.

Billy blows smoke into her face. "Listen, Max. You're a piece of shit. But boys. Boys are fucking trash. They will ruin your life."

"Gee. Than-" Max throws her forearms up in the air, fingers sarcastic. Billy snatches her wrist. Squeezes it tight. Can feel Max's pulse beating one. She's holding too tight and she knows it. Two.

Billy's calm, leans her head back. Juts her chin so that Max looks her

in the eye. Her pale lashes make her look so young. Billy had already been smashed into a medically induced coma, lost her virginity and got so drunk she'd had to get stomach pumped by Max's age. So. Not that fucking young. "I'm older than you. And this is how it works. You do as I say and you stay away from him." She shoves Max's arm back to her so she knocks into the door. "Got it?"

"Yes."

---

Billy had been feeling a bit bad about the wrist grabbing thing. She doesn't normally touch Max. She didn't mean to get violent like that. But she was riled from basketball. From fucking Stevie Harrington. And Max pushed her luck. Max is wearing a long sleeved tee today, so she presumes that she left a mark that Max feels obligated to cover up.

She doesn't have to do that. Neil'll find some other reason to wail on her, but she's grateful that there's one less. For now. It's five am on Saturday and they're all sat around the table quietly eating toast and bitter coffee. Like this is what normal families do. Neil's got his work overalls on. He's being sent out to some town fifty miles away to build an apartment complex, single-bloody-handed by the sounds of it, and won't be back until Sunday night. So here they are. Saying goodbye. Billy guesses. She's not actually sure.

Billy's tired, but her shoulders jitter like an aging alcoholic. It's like she's cold. But she's got a thick Hawkins High hoodie on that she stole from their Small Forward. She shoves another slice of toast in her mouth to try and stop shivering. She stays quiet as Neil reels of her weekend duties. Chores out in the yard, cabinets that need their screws tightening, the baseboard in the living room needs neatening. Laundry, dishes, meals for Max, rides for Max, fucking bedtime stories for Max.

Max thinks she can get cheeky with Billy on the way to the arcade. Tries to wrangle extra time. Billy warns her. "One hour." She's got shit to do. And no money. She can only hang out at the diner waiting for so long. She gets the dense-looking brownie because breakfast was at stupid o'clock in the morning and she's hungry again. Except

there's a gross sour peach-tasting jam in it. So she's thinking about whose head it would be fair to bash in for this travesty, when Stevie Harrington sits down across from her.

"Hello."

Stevie is such a fucking prep. She's not even a fucking jock. She looks like she'd melt in the rain. She's wearing a baby pink *Ralph Lauren* sweater and Billy kinda wants to smear the disgusting dessert on it. She bites down on the urge by saying, "You know what's in this?" She prods at it with a fork.

"Oh. Erm, persimmon. I guess. It's big in Indiana."

"Right." She uses the tip of the fork prongs to scoop up whipped cream and takes the opportunity to luridly lick it off.

Stevie wiggles in her seat. Looks away. Folds her arms.

Jesus. Billy can't have this for the next year. "I'm joking. You know. You can chill the fuck out now." She taps her fork against the side of the plate, before flippantly angling it away. "Go on. You're blocking my view."

"Fine." Stevie puts her hands flat on the table and leans in low. "But look." She's got two tiny freckles on the arch of her right cheekbone. "Back the fuck off in basketball. I don't care about it enough to get knocked out for Captain." She gets up from the table. Brushes her hair over her shoulder. She shrugs as she walks away. "It's yours."

Doesn't care about basketball. What a fucking hellscape.

Just gone midday and it's bright enough that Billy rummages around her glove compartment for her sunglasses for the first time since California. She doesn't look at Max as she climbs in the car, skateboard awkwardly bashing her knees. Max is already muttering, "I'm not late."

"What did I tell you?"

"What?"

“I told you to stay away from him.”

“Lucas? He’s nobody. Let’s go.” Max shouldn’t tell Billy want to do.

Billy rolls her head towards Max, surveys her wandering eyes through her *aviators*. “You know what happens when you lie.”

“I’m not lying. He’s in my class. That Stevie girl is picking him and Dustin up.” She points at the windscreen and Billy follows her gesture to where Stevie has some kid in a dumb hat in a loose headlock. They’re giggling like pre-schoolers. Lucas is walking over to them, waving his hands.

Billy figures that. That is fucking weird. She literally understands nothing about this godforsaken town. “Here.” She tosses a packet of *Oreos* onto Max’s lap.

--

Stevie likes hanging out at the Henderson house. Especially at the weekends. Mrs Henderson always cooks a big lunch like it’s Thanksgiving or something. She’s passed her sweet tooth onto Dustin so everything’s candy coated. Marshmallow in the sweet potatoes and maple syrup in the cornbread. Stevie’s mom would throw a fit if she found out Stevie was eating this crap.

Dustin swats at Stevie with a dishtowel. “C’mon, man. Focus.” Stevie’s feeling overstuffed-dumb, plumped-up-stupid. She just wants to flop on the couch, but fair’s fair. She takes the towel and begins drying the pans Dustin has already washed.

He’s jabbering away about something Mike was saying. If Stevie’s honest she’s not a great fan of Mike and not just because he’s Nancy’s brother. He’s just. A bit. Intense. For a thirteen year old. And basically everything he says is a conspiracy theory and Stevie’s not sure Dustin needs that kinda influence.

“It would make total sense, right?”

Stevie’s not sure what Dustin’s talking about. He flicks soap bubbles at her. “Yeah. Sure, total sense.”

“That’s what I’m saying, Stevie. I know you think Mike’s a wacko, but no shit. He did his research with this.” Because Dustin’s a loon, he puts on an awful Russian accent and says, “The CIA stare at goats.”

He sounds more like *Count von Count*, so Stevie tips her head back and top teeth stuck out gargles, “One. Mad Amerikan. Two. Ah-ah-ah.”

Dustin sniggers and pokes a wet kitchen-gloved finger into Stevie’s side. “Hey. You ever see that episode with the fruit singing in Spanish?”

Stevie pokes him back. “Nah. Too old.”

“Pssh.” Dustin bops his head. “Max says everybody speaks Spanish in California.”

Stevie doesn’t think this is true. “Who’s Max?”

“She’s new. She’s got red hair.” Dustin seems to consider for a moment what might best describe Max. “She skateboards.” He looks at Stevie and perhaps spots the disinterested way Stevie is putting away plates. “She’s got a sister.”

Nothing ever happens in Hawkins. Stevie takes a shot. “Billy?”

“Sure. She seems kinda mean.”

Stevie does think that’s true. But so is Nancy and Billy is pretty in a way that Stevie can’t yet describe. She’s fucking solid. All tan curves that can push Stevie around no trouble. Stevie frowns. Billy’s been in town less than a week and she’s pulled Stevie’s hair nine times and pushed her to the floor twice. It’s not on, really.

--

Billy didn’t exactly enjoy spending her Saturday fucking about cleaning and fixing shit, but she had the house almost to herself and put *The Runaways* on really loud. Max spent the day sulking in her room, but Billy took her to the arcade so she got her kicks and she didn’t have to help with the housework. So. What more does she want.

Billy wakes up on Sunday morning, aching. It doesn't feel good like after a basketball win, 'cause it's Neil's fault and there's no way any other dipshit in Hawkins is waking up feeling like they just joined the Marines. And Neil will still pick a fight when he gets back. But. It's done.

She can do whatever she fucking wants. She sort of wants to find out if there's a basketball court around. There's probably not. There doesn't seem to be anything in Hawkins. Then there's finding someone she could force to play her. She'd probably have to have it out with Tommy. Smack him about a bit. Get him good and scared, until he no longer sees her as a girl.

Ruth would be a joke, Billy's not sure she's ever picked a ball up. Not even a softball. Girls in Hawkins aren't like girls back home. They don't seem to do much. The girls on the basketball team are barely worth her time. It's like they're just playing to get gym credit. Even Harrington. Stupid jerk. Who gives up Captain like that. Now it's like it doesn't mean anything. Just up for any dumbass volunteer to take.

She wants Stevie to fight her for it. Her face gone all blotchy. Frustrated and hot from running. Billy likes that. Like Stevie can't keep up. Like Billy's too much for her. Her long hair all scattered. Dumb fucking bangs she's always pushing off her face, sweat damp.

That fucking hair that on Thursday she wore in a high ponytail with a big sissy bow, for fuck's sake. Hair trailing down to her middle back and if that doesn't get Billy's motor going. She hasn't resisted the urge to tug at it yet. Not hard or anything. But just enough of a surprise that it gets Stevie's chin snapping up to the ceiling before she rights her head and frowns at Billy. Mouth twisted at the corner.

Pushing her hand into her basketball shorts, Billy's wrist nudges comfortably at her hipbone. Jesus. She's never actually seen Stevie smile. She mostly looks irritated. But damn if Billy doesn't take that on a personal level. Like she isn't fucking mad all the time. Like maybe. Stevie looks like she's looking for somebody to crush shit with. Burn shit up. Make the world fearful. Even in her fucking pastels.

Billy doesn't know what Stevie's deal is. Just that one day she was

friends with everybody. Everybody. Up to an including the student body at St. Mary's. Then suddenly she was only friends with Nancy Wheeler. Getting dragged to shit like debate club and ballet class. Stevie's cute and all but she's no ballerina. Basketball is testament to that. Billy snorts through her nose and pitterpatters her fingertips just at the join between her thigh and pussy.

Except they've had some kind of argument that nobody gives a fuck about, so Stevie sits with the chicks from the swim team at lunch, looking like death warmed over. And pretends to laugh with those girls who really fucking dig home ec' in the hallway and looks like she's about to spew. And lets fucking Tommy H walk her to her car looking bored as shit.

She strokes her middlefinger softly over her tummy, above the start of her pubic hair. Stevie didn't look bored when she was telling Billy to leave her alone. If Billy wants to push her luck, Stevie looked fucking excited. She presses her finger down horizontally. Tucks the tip of it into her hood. Before flicking forward. She rolls her lips together. Circles her clit.

Stevie doesn't wear any make-up, but she stinks of rich-bitch perfume. Acting tough like that, Queen Bee Stevie with the bags under her eyes that could rival Billy's and her fake-ass Miss Congeniality attitude. Billy dips her finger lower, into the heat of her cunt. She feels the wrong kind of wet. She avoids her fingers touching her shorts, but tugs them out to check. They're a muddy red. Some days, Billy really hates being a girl.

--

Billy is trying to bench press more than she has before to avoid thinking about the tummy cramps that are threatening nuclear war on her body, when the doorbell goes.

"Max," she hollers. "Max!" She hefts the weight back onto the bar and storms down the hall to bang on Max's bedroom door.

Max opens it, hair everywhere, roll of *Duct Tape* in one hand. "What?" Her voice is steel thin.

Billy jabs a finger towards the door. If this were anything close to being fun, it might be funny how the doorbell goes again. Max pushes past Billy. Billy sneers as she goes and lights a cigarette. She wanders into the kitchen. Takes four puffs before stubbing it out on the drainingboard. Feeling agitated. Instead, she takes a beer from the fridge. She gulps it down in four too big swallows. She's crushing it between her hands when Max walks too carefully past.

"Who was it?" She stretches an elbow up on the kitchen doorframe. Looks down at Max.

"No-one."

"You tell me 'no-one' quite a lot." Billy raises an eyebrow.

"Just. Girl Scouts. They want me to join."

Billy does not fucking believe this for one second. But she's tired and wants to lie down on her front and maybe try to jerk off again. She glares at Max, but stalks off to her room without saying anything else. She knows Max is flipping her off behind her back, but she can't bring herself to care.

--

Billy wakes up four hours later and figures she may as well make the most of her dad not being around. She rubs her fists into her eyesockets and stretches. There's mascara smeared over her knuckles and she wipes it across her sheets. She drags herself from the bed.

Putting around the room, spraying liberal amounts of deodorant, she sneers at the generic store can. It smells stupid. Nothing like whatever it is that Stevie Harrington reeks of. Jesus. What is that shampoo she uses. She could smell it for hours after leaving the showers at the end of practice.

It's quiet without Neil around. A quiet that can be felt. Like house itself has heaved a sigh. Settled comfortable into Indiana limestone. She pulls on a tight red button-up. Makes sure her pendant is visible. She feels warm from her bed. She gets up close to the old vanity mirror she has propped on a milkcrate. Her cheeks are pinked.

She grins dirty. She knows what that looks like. She flashes the mascara wand over her thick lashes and sprays *Aqua Net* onto her front curls. Winks. Tugs briefly at hexagonal creole earrings, glinting.

Neil pounds at the door. Jesus. She touches her *Mother Mary* one tap. He calls her name, voice edged. Two. Neil pushes his way in. "Max is missing." Like Billy might have stashed the kid under her bed.

She's feels like she's sunk in salt water. Max can't be missing. Kids like Max don't go missing in places like Hawkins. Neil has hefted open the window sash and is glaring out like Max might hidden under the garage awning. There's a panic here that Billy has never felt before. Susan lurks in the hallway. Billy draws in next to her dad. "Look, she's probably fine."

Neil takes her by the throat with one hand. He's quick. Quicker than Billy ever remembers him being. He presses her against the windowframe. "What did we talk about?" His voice is soft. Your sister's okay, we'll find her. "What did we talk about, Billy?" This isn't your fault. She can feel her swallow edge past his fingers.

"Respect. And responsibility." She can't quite get the whole word out. Two many esses for her to breathe around.

"So while you were in here. Dolling yourself up like a. Whore." He squeezes. Fuck. Does he want her dead. "Your baby sister is out there. Missing." His eyes are the same colour as Max's.

He steps back, but keeps his forearms pressed against her chest so that she travels with him. She knows this shit is going to leave marks. And she doesn't own shit like foundation. She tries to stop her eyes from rolling back. Keeps them lowered. Tries to silently suck air in through her nose. "You're going to find her. And bring her home."

Neil tilts his head slightly, mouth going Machiavelli in just one corner. It isn't God who tests the impossible. "Yes. Sir." She knows her lines.

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Nancy owes Stevie big-time for this. Sundays are for cartoons, long-

distance running, jerking off in the bath and buying enough packs of *Mallomars* to last the week. Not babysitting. She likes Dustin. He's a good kid and kinda hysterical. But the rest of them. Fucking Mike. Stevie's not really into that. And for fuck's sake. Will too. Little odd-ball. Jonathan's little brother. They really are yanking her chain. It's Sunday. She wants to tell them. Sunday.

Stevie had been pretty invested in some shit *YM* magazine was dishing on French braids and picking out blue *Mike and Ikes* from the packet to eat first. Then Nancy had called. Like. You busy. No. Stevie sprays enough *Farah Fawcett* hairspray over her new 'do that she nearly starts coughing over the phone. Nancy sounds like she might want to chew Stevie out for it, but then she starts whining about some college crap that her and Jonathan need to do. And can Stevie please come over to the Byers's.

The new girl. Max. Is staring at her. Stevie is vaguely in possession of the knowledge that her and Billy are step-sisters, but they look stupid similar. They've both got soul-reading blue eyes, tangled hair and a mouth that looks like it's not afraid to go off at any moment.

Stevie sighs. "You wanna make cookies?"

Max crosses her arms. "'Cause I'm a girl?"

There's an eighty-percent chance that Stevie is going to become a pencil-skirt wearing, husband-hunting receptionist in about seven months. She's not going take up some feminist-bullshit fight with a thirteen year old. "No. 'Cause your dumb friends won't restart the campaign just so you can join in."

Max looks behind her at the boys sprawled across the living room floor. Mike is already yelling a bunch of words at Lucas that Stevie understands separately, but together sound like algebra. Fucking *Dungeons and Dragons* man.

"C'mon. I know where Mrs Byers hides the *Marshmallow Fluff*."

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Stevie's not going to do anything stupid. Like tell Nancy. But the day

turned out pretty good. Max had wanted to play one-on-one out in the yard, which had surprised Stevie, but she was never one to turn down basketball. Their hollering had lured the boys out and Stevie had managed to push them all into a game of *Marco Polo* in the woods.

Eventually, Mike got sulky and as the night shuffled October-bit leaves, hearing Dustin's disembodied voice got a bit too spooky for Stevie and she herded them up and in. Lucas wants to watch *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*, but Will says they should watch *The Sword and the Sorcerer* again, while they have the tape.

You don't gotta wear the tape thin, kid. Stevie rolls her eyes. She's in the kitchen, looking through Mrs Byers's freezer to see if she's anything worthwhile for dinner. An engine roar nearly has her bashing her head against the frosted edge. The driveway is too long for anybody to accidentally swing by this close. This late in the evening. That fucking loud. She ducks into the living room. The kids have gone still on the couch.

"It's my sister. She'll kill us."

Fuck. What. Fuck. Stevie doesn't know what's going on. Billy's a nightmare, but she's not actually dangerous. She carefully looks away from the kids, calmly opens the door and steps out.

Billy is leaning on the open door of her *Camaro*. Her hair is wild. Her shirt, one button too many undone to be decent, makes it look like this was probably not her chosen destination.

"Am I dreaming, or is that you Harrington?"

Jesus. Stevie looks away. Doesn't look to the heavens like she wants to. "Yeah. It's me, don't cream your pants." Stevie pushes the sleeves of her thin jacket over her elbows. She walks loose, closer to Billy. Limbs not invested in this mission. This is boring.

Billy bites out a snapped laugh. "Hmmm." She sucks on a cigarette. Pulls off the leather jacket she's wearing and throws it on the driver's seat before slamming the door. She takes a step forward. Too close. Stevie goes a little cross-eyed looking down their inch height

difference at her. "See. Something here isn't right."

Stevie puts her hands on her hips. Billy's got the prettiest eyes in the world. Stevie's sure this is not what she should be focusing on. But she doesn't know what Billy wants from her. And well. She's gonna give credit where it's due. Billy's a weirdo, but those beauty queen lashes. Christ.

"The step-sister goes missing. All day. And I find her with you." Billy looks around Stevie's shoulder. Takes the opportunity to obscenely breathe in whatever the fuck that too strong perfume Stevie wears. She glares at the house. She can see the kids through the window. They've pulled back ratty looking curtains. Noses pressed to the glass like dumb goldfish. Why does the Byers family live in a fucking shack in the middle of the woods. "It's giving me the heebie jeebies, Harrington."

Billy leans back. Tilts her shoulders, takes a drag of her cigarette before flicking it away.

Stevie's tried. It's Sunday. Billy talks too fucking much. She doesn't want to this to be. A thing. But Billy's got her riled now. "I don't know what to tell you, man. Max isn't here."

Billy cups Stevie's neck. Strokes the edges of her thumbs over her jaw and lets smoke escape her mouth, grey plumes billowing making Stevie squint. "Then. Who is that?" Billy presses her arms into Stevie's chest and steps, their legs tessellate. She forcefully jerks her wrists so that Stevie can see what she can.

Her neck twinges painfully. She can feel Billy's tense stomach is pressed up against her, Billy's angry panting that's concealed behind her locked teeth. This chick is fucking crazy. She groans. The stupid-ass kids are in plain fucking sight. "Shit."

Billy gives Stevie one hard shake and she falls to the floor. She steps over her to the open front door and says without looking back, "I told you to plant you feet."

Stevie clutches her shoulder where she's fallen awkwardly on a rock. What the fuck is this. She stumbles to her feet. Billy's just a girl. She's not actually going to hurt Max. It's only curfew, right. She catches up to her, reaches her arm out, her fingertips grazing Billy's neck as she steps towards the kids.

"Well well well." Billy feels mad as fucking hell. Acid static rattling through her veins, numbing her. Setting her alight. "What did I tell you, Max?" She jabs her finger in the air close to Max's face. "What did I tell you, huh?"

"Billy. We're just playing."

Billy looms over Lucas Sinclair. The kid looks scared fucking witless. Good. She stares him down. "Boys. Are trash." She takes Lucas's shirt collar in her hands and tugs. The toes of his sneakers brush the ground. "They will ruin your life."

Stevie has only ever been in one fight in her life. 'Cause normal girls don't fucking fight. Tommy had been real mean to Carol. Trying to get her to- Anyway. And Carol had cried for days. So Stevie did what best friends are supposed to and had told him to his face what a fucking jerk he was. Carol found out and because she was a thirteen-year-old bitch had slapped Stevie right across the face.

Stevie hadn't really known what to do. Her eyes burned with the disloyalty of Carol. How fucking dare she. Backstabber. All Stevie could think of was the villains in *Scooby Doo*, so she'd kicked Carol in the crotch. Not a great moment. Carol's still kind of a bitch.

She grabs Billy around the waist and she drops Lucas in surprise. Turns to Stevie, face murderous. Stevie lets go, palms dragging over Billy's soft hips. Billy grits out, "Don't fucking touch me."

Stevie feels dumb. She grins. She pokes Billy's bare chest, just above her saint, with the tips of her index and middle fingers. "Then get out." Billy's skin is hot. Sticky.

Stevie doesn't see it coming when Billy swings at her. Her sharp left hook shattering pain through her cheek. Stevie gasps. Presses the same fingertips gingerly to her face, looks at Billy in shock, before

lunging at her. She gathers Billy's blonde curls at the back of her head in both hands and pulls. Teeth bared.

Billy spreads her arms wide, allowing Stevie to lean her body weight on her, dancing her backward. "Queen Stevie. Looks like I found her." She roughly pushes Stevie in the ribs, sending her toppling backwards.

She straddles Stevie's waist. Settles cosy like. Puts her hands either side of Stevie's head. Licks her bottom lip. "Hello darling."

Stevie feels too warm. This is too much. "Get off me."

Billy rocks her hips in a slow circle. Her eyes flicker over Stevie's face. Her cheek is bruising, skin flushed. Her mouth open. Billy lets out a low grumbling hum. Stevie breathes in one. Out two.

Max knows she shouldn't touch Billy, but she's scared. She's seen cops struggle to restrain Billy. The Byers's warm home feels eerie. Like Billy brought a thunder tunnelling catacombs through the walls. Unrighteous outrage at nothing in particular. Stevie's gone still under Billy's fury and Billy looks ready to pounce. Max quietly treads across the floor. She places her hand squarely in the centre of Billy's spine.

Billy leaps to her feet and twists like a hissing cat and clenches her fist around Max's wrist. She rolls her lips into a thin line. Max doesn't move. Waits for Billy. Waits for eternity. One. Two.

"We're leaving." She drags Max out, feet stumbling next to Billy's long strides. As they get to the car Billy releases Max. Watches her rub at her arm. Shit. She did it again. She rolls her eyes. It's fine. Fuck. Neil will take responsibility for her fucking mess. He'll make sure she never does it again.

--

Billy's being a creep. She knows she is. But that doesn't stop her from leaning against the stall in the girl's bathroom watching Nancy Wheeler apply lip balm from a peachy tin. Billy's got a fucking sparkling black eye that's all violet and swollen. It's mottling yellow out towards her temple.

She can admit it to herself. She's so fucking jealous of Nancy Wheeler. She feels it searing at the back of neck like sunburn, how jealous she is.

Nancy is not afraid of her. All the girls are now. Ruth had smiled at her as she sat down in Biology, but Billy knows that look. Knows it means you're crazy. But I'm too chickenshit to do anything about it. Nancy holds her gaze in the mirror.

"You should see the nurse about that."

Billy tips her head back. Eyes hooded in disbelief at how stupid somebody so smart can be. She folds her arms. Moans sarcastically. Stevie Harrington gets knocked down one time and everybody flips their shit. It's an every fucking day occurrence for Billy. It's not fair. It's not fucking fair.

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Given that Billy has spent most of the week being dodged by basically everyone. How she fucking likes it. Beth is clearly fucking nuts for wanting in with the new bitch. But she's also head cheerleader so Billy just rolls with it when she finds out they've become Billy-and-Beth.

She's not even sure how it happened. She's interacted with Beth exactly once to tell her what a fucking slut she looks in her uniform. But fucking Rick leans against her goddamn locker asking if her and Beth are going to the quarry on Friday. Like her and Beth come as mix'n'match brunch items.

Billy knows she's being dragged into psychological warfare, but Beth's playing the long game and so far Billy's only gained near-pleasant kicks from this. She told Rick that Beth would be there with bells on and that she's real excited to see him. Wink. So that will probably turn out hilarious. Cheerleader number three. Rachael? Rebecca? Whatever skipped study hall with Billy and shared her smokes. Looking wary when Billy stood too close. Then, like a dream come true, Jonathan fucking Byers trips over his own fucking feet gagging to tell her to stay away from Nancy. And Stevie.

“You’re a mean person, Billy Hargrove.”

Billy blows smoke in his face and gets in her car. Naturally, Billy goes out of her way to do the exact opposite of Byers’s friendly piece of advice.

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Max doesn’t ask, but Billy takes her to the arcade. She wants to get a proper look at Stevie. Their faces match. Stevie has been ducking out of basketball and Billy wants to see the evidence that she’s right. Stevie fucking deserve everything she got. Fucking liar. Stevie made her do that.

When Billy parks, Max stays sitting. She tugs at the sleeves of her jumper. Billy looks ahead, sunglasses on. “Go on. Get out. One hour.”

She loiters, chain smoking. Pacing in tight circles. She takes her *aviators* off and puts them in her pocket before stalking towards the diner.

Stevie’s sat in a booth eating what looks like cherry pie. But Billy can’t believe that’s true. Billy takes a seat opposite her and jams her finger into the filling. Licks it off. Wants to fucking scream that it is cherry pie and flashes her teeth at Stevie.

Stevie frowns. Shoves her plate towards Billy. “What?”

Billy digs in. She feels sick. Needs something to do. “Where ya been Stevie-kins?”

Jesus. Stevie’s cheek aches at the sight of Billy. She folds her arms. Billy’s got piecrust crumbs smeared at the corner of her mouth and red cheery on her chin. She eats like an animal. “Nowhere.” Jesus. Dumb answer. Billy sends her brain into ocean tidepools. Drowning in shallow water. There’s too many barriers and no boundaries set with her. She’s Californian sun. Too bright, too hot. Blinding.

Billy raises an eyebrow at her. Swallows her last mouthful. They stare at each other. Nancy told Stevie about Billy’s face and Stevie spotted it across the school hallway on her way to English. People assumed that Stevie gave as good as she got. Stevie doesn’t want to guess.

Girls don't fight. But boys do. Men do.

"M sorry."

"Excuse me?"

Fuck Stevie's a fucking brat. Billy's willing to give her another smack, just to get her down a peg or two. "I said. 'm sorry. 'bout your-" Billy gestures vaguely at her own cheek.

Stevie looks around. She can see Jimmy and Rick from the football team jeering at the young man behind the counter. Stevie links her fingers together on the tabletop. Says in a clear tone, like she's practicing in Spanish. "I'm sorry too."

Billy narrows her eyes. Turns her head and spies their classmates. She tilts her head at Stevie before nodding stiffly. "Good."

Stevie's nails are painted a pale, cornflower blue. Billy wonders if Nancy slept over and did them for her. If they ate pizza with Stevie's parents and got to stay up late watching chick flicks with ice-cream. If Stevie and Nancy wear best-friend matching nighties. If they talk about boys. Billy doesn't have any friends. She doesn't know what girls do.

"Is there a basketball court around here?"

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There isn't, but Stevie has a set of keys to the gym that she hands over. "Captain."

Billy's sporting new bruises. She's not entirely sure what they're for. Susan mentioned a bake sale, so maybe she didn't offer to help. Or maybe Neil got tired of her using his bench-press. Or maybe Max was late to something. Any of these things could have happened. Billy doesn't know or care. She's felt zoned out, glazed over, melted down since apologising to Stevie.

She doesn't say sorry. Nobody has ever expected her too, so she never has. She knew though. Innately. Like she knows she's not the same as other girls. Like she knew her mom wasn't the same as other moms.

Like she knew they were going to leave California. Knew that she had to say sorry to Stevie Harrington.

She bounces the basketball. The textured rubber feels familiar. Comforting. The only thing in the world that doesn't change or want her to change. She shoots.

"You're not at the quarry."

Billy looks up at the sound of Stevie's voice. It's Friday night. She should be getting drunk and edging Beth towards the scrap she's bargaining for. She doesn't say anything, but tosses the rebounded ball at Stevie.

Stevie dribbles it as she walks over. It slaps against the gym floor. She keeps her eyes on Billy before turning towards the hoop. She shoots. The ball swishes through the net and hits the ground. The sound echoes off the panelled walls.

Stevie is stood very close. Her hair is loose and forms soft waves behind her ears. She's wearing a white polo shirt and pristine white sneakers. She touches the tip of her finger under Billy's chin to get her to look up. Look at her. She slowly touches the edge of her nose to Billy's. Billy holds her breath. Stevie kisses her. Shy and soft. Once. Twice. Three times.